Travels with Ma

STEVE ANDERSON

Le fils de Doris partage avec sa mère, ses souvenirs de voyage en train et en roulotte à travers le Canada ainsi que ceux qu'ils firent ensemble en Europe. Il partage avec les lectrices, la merveilleuse ironie de sa mère, ses observations sur l'état du monde et son véritable amour de l'humanité qui n'ont pas cessé de la fasciner.

My mother loved to travel. She was always intrigued by new places, and from an early age, my brothers and I were often her travelling companions. As infants, Peter, Mitch, and I were taken to Calgary and Prince Edward Island to be inspected by eager grandparents. When we were a bit older, we came to share her love of train travel, making the rail journey from Toronto to Vancouver, and later taking the "Polar Bear Express" to Moosonee and Moose Factory on James Bay.

During the summer of 1973, she decided to take her three children to Alberta where she planned to rent a camper van. We spent most of the month of August driving from the Badlands to the Rockies, and along the way we visited many relations, went trail riding, climbed mountains, and crept up to all sorts of wild creatures. Ma recalled later that she nearly died on the spot when, parked beside a swift mountain river dotted with boulders, she heard a woman exclaim, "My God, there are children out there!" Our mother didn't have to think very hard to imagine whose children they were likely to be, and turned to see the three of us standing on a rock in midstream, jumping around carelessly.

Camper travel had a certain appeal for Ma, who liked to be in charge of her itinerary every step of the way, and liked to be able to change course whenever an interesting opportunity presented itself.

A multitalented individual, our mother was nonetheless always a rather creative driver—indeed, while operating a motor vehicle she seemed to resent that the pesky laws of physics applied to her. Needless to say, this problem was compounded when she was perched behind the wheel of an unwieldy Ford Landliner. The camper often seemed to be lurching abruptly one way or another, or driving over top of things it wasn't designed to negotiate.

Doris with nephew Jamie and son Mitchell, c.1971.

The Anderson family, c.1968.

In spite of these challenges, the western odyssey was a great experience for all of us. Best of all, Ma gave us a guided tour of her past, introducing us to her many rela-

tions and friends and showing us the communities where she had worked as a young teacher, and the places she had visited during her free time.

By 1977, when she left *Chatelaine* magazine and was ready to take a break and try something different, she had decided that an extended camper trip through Western Europe would be just the thing. In September, Ma, my brother Mitch (aged 14), and I (aged 16) flew to London where we stayed for a week, visiting her old friend, author Mollie Gillen. (Ma's enthusiasm for London was enormous, as she had a very keen interest in history, the arts, and humanity's capacity for strangeness.)

Arriving in Amsterdam, we made our way to the campground rental agency that was to provide our little Volkswagen RV. After a week in Holland, we packed up our gear and began chugging down Germany's autobahn, the start of a four-month road trip. To Ma's dismay, my brand-new Ontario drivers' licence had no validity at all on the continent. As a 16-year-old tourist, I was not permitted to operate the van. This meant that Ma, already a very innovative motorist, would be finding herself behind the wheel for daily marathon journeys, sharing the road with the passionate and imaginative drivers of France, Spain, and Italy. It was, as they say, a trip.

The sights were extraordinary—Koln's cathedral, Heidelberg Castle, Mont Saint-Michel, Notre Dame—but the camper persisted in doing bizarre things. For some reason it began fishtailing wildly as we were making our way along the rain-soaked and treacherous mountain roads of the Pyrenees in Spain. It did a sort of shimmying '70s disco routine, before spinning around 180 degrees and crashing over on its side. With the help of a platoon of Spanish policemen (who, Ma noted, were dressed like aviators), we got the battered camper righted and set off wheezing down the highway again. In Heidelberg, we provided immense entertainment to a crowd of German commuters when we somehow came puttering along a dedicated tramline. Mitch and I complained that the cramped VW design made it impossible for us to crawl under our seats in mortification. "Oh, shut up," Ma muttered, tightening her grip on wheel and punching the accelerator.

Camper poltergeists and wrong turns aside, the trip was full of so many fascinating adventures that it's impossible to recount them all. Our mother loved setting an ambitious pace, and we somehow made it through Holland, Germany, Luxembourg, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Austria, before returning to Amsterdam. We walked throughout Madrid, as the Spaniards enjoyed their first taste of democracy in decades. We stayed in Malaga with Ma's old friend, the wonderful Finnish writer Eva-Lis Wuorio. We climbed the towers of Florence, Venice, and Genoa, and visited the ruins of Pompeii and the catacombs of Rome. On Christmas morning, we were in the crowd at St. Peter's Basilica, as Pope Paul VI was carried down the nave in what would be his final Christmas procession. Mitch and I were simply bowled over by the pageantry

Doris, 1950s.

On husband Dave's boat, c.1970.

Doris in Prince Edward Island, c.2002.

Doris Anderson, after receiving the Order of Canada, with son Steve, 14 years old, 1974.

of the Vatican, which we agreed was "even cooler than the Queen concert at Maple Leaf Gardens." Ma became concerned that we were on the verge of conversion and possibly a life in the priesthood—and perhaps regretted having bought us St. Christopher medals (as protection against the whims of the possessed Volkswagen).

I remember very well the places that affected my mother most profoundly—the battlefields, monuments, and cemeteries dedicated to the Canadian and Allied soldiers of the World Wars. Her father had spent four years in the trenches of the Great War, and she knew that this experience had scarred him deeply. Her half brothers and many of her friends had fought in the Second World War. I remember how sombre she became when she realized that she had finally located the burial place of her high school boyfriend who had died in Normandy.

She loathed the idea of armed conflict, of course, and told us later that she remembered her friends' anger and pessimism in 1939, when it was becoming clear that another war would be fought in Europe. She recalled a gathering of her high school acquaintances, whose parents had all suffered through the years 1914-1918. With the healthy cynicism of the young, her friends made it clear that they had no intention of sacrificing themselves for "a bunch of politicians." And yet within a year, when it had become clear what was at stake, every one of the young men in that room had enlisted.

Doris Anderson had a deep love and respect for history, and a desire for a peaceful, just world where everyone, everywhere would have a "fair shot" in life. During all those days and nights, cooped up in a tiny van traversing a big continent, Mitch and I had a special opportunity to discover what made our mother tick. Throughout her life she worked for cooperation and tolerance, but her awareness of history and her own life experience had honed a keen conviction that sometimes—most of the time—change doesn't come without a fight.

She had a wonderful sense of irony, and always delighted us with her wry observations about the bizarre state of the world. But beneath it all was a real love of human beings, who never ceased to fascinate her. She loved people's personal stories and our collective past, and she always marvelled at humanity's capacity for survival.

On one of our earliest trips together, we visited her family plot in the Alberta cemetery where her ashes are now buried. I remember walking beside my mother 40 years ago, as she read the inscriptions on the headstones of relatives and strangers.

"Here's another young woman who died giving birth … that happened all the time in my grandmother's day," she said. "Look at all these children—lots of them just babies—who died of measles, diphtheria, tuberculosis … they never had a chance."

She found it incredible that humanity, especially the female half of the species, had overcome so much, fought so hard, and come so far—but she believed that we owe it to both ancestors and descendents to work towards a future that will be unimaginably better.

A few years ago, she reflected: "My life has been wonderful—varied and challenging. I feel I've been extremely lucky to have lived during these turbulent and changing times. If I die in the next few years—while I'm still vigorous, useful, and involved—that's exactly the way I would choose."

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CAN WE REALLY THROW AWAY OUR WORLD?

Chatelaine, Editorial, June 1971

Everyone is against pollution. We all know that if we don't stop emptying our sewers into lakes and rivers we'll end up with swamps. And if we don't stop producing garbage at the rate of five pounds per person per day, we'll all be living in a huge garbage dump.

But where do we start on the problem?…

One third of the world hasn't enough to eat (Africa and Asia). One third of the world (our third) worries about eating too much and produces one quarter of the weight of an average person in garbage every week, not to mention all the pollution in the air and water.

Unless we want dead lakes, depleted resources, polluted air, we've got to act—or condemn our child to Götterdämmerung. We seem to think we can afford to throw away vast quantities of materials. But can we really throw away our world?

Doris Anderson, Editor